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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000001

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: Violent Demolition of Crucifix Overshadows Progress on
Religious Freedom in Vietnam

CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, Deputy Chief of Mission; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

1.(SBU) Summary: Hundreds of Vietnamese security forces and local "thugs" tore down a crucifix in Dong Chiem district of Hanoi on January 6. Credible Catholic church sources report that these individuals used tear gas to disperse the parishioners and that as many as 12 individuals were injured. The Catholic church in Hanoi called the demolition of the crucifix an "act of sacrilege" and characterized the attacks on parishioners as "savage and inhuman acts." Dong Chiem authorities and Ministry of Public Security officials say the parishioners violated Vietnamese laws by building the crucifix on state land, defend the GVN's right to enforce Vietnamese law, and deny using force on the parishioners. Political Counselor conveyed our concerns about the credible reports of security forces using force on the parishioners and cautioned that the GVN's handling of this situation could complicate efforts to move relations forward. The Ambassador will reiterate this message during his lunch with the Deputy Foreign Minister January 13. End summary.

2. (SBU) According to our Catholic church sources, at approximately 0200 on January 6, 600-1,000 policemen, security forces and local "thugs," some armed with weapons, batons, tear gas, and police dogs, besieged the parishes of Nghia Ai, Tuy Hien, and Dong Chiem. They blocked access to mount "Nui Tho" (near An Phu commune, My Duc district, Hanoi) and began demolishing a crucifix. Parishioners of Dong Chiem parish reportedly urged the police and security forces to stop, but were unsuccessful. The police/security forces/armed individuals sealed off the perimeter around the mountain, and fired tear gas on some of the parishioners. Approximately one dozen parishioners were beaten, of whom two were seriously injured and were hospitalized.

3.(SBU) On January 6, the Catholic Archdiocese of Hanoi's office issued a statement claiming ownership of the mountain, called the demolition of the crucifix an "act of sacrilege," and characterized the attacks on parishioners as "savage and inhuman acts." On January 8, ten bishops of northern Vietnam issued a statement describing the destruction of the crucifix - and the violence against the parishioners - as "two ingredients of government policy in resolving religious disputes." On January 8, the People's Committee of My Duc district in Hanoi fired back, issuing a document that criticizes the local parish priest for erecting the crucifix in March 2009 without permission from competent agencies, and arguing that this act violated existing laws and regulations. The People's Committee further blamed the local parish priest for instigating local parishioners to erect a new crucifix in 2009, after the former one had been removed.

4. (C) Ministry of Public Security officials telephoned the Embassy on January 11 to ask Political Counselor to meet with Senior

Colonel Chau the following morning. Colonel Chau opened the meeting by noting that he was following through on his commitment to PolChief during their first meeting in September to provide the USG the "official position" on developments of possible interest. He later explained that the meeting was motivated in part by MPS's desire to "correct" misinformation that would be circulating in Vietnam and abroad by foreign media and others to discredit the GVN and its record at improving religious freedom in Vietnam.

15. (C) Reading from a prepared report which he noted had been approved by the MPS leadership, Chau provided the following "official position:" The Catholic church in Dong Chiem, with the support of central Catholic church authorities, erected the crucifix in March 2009 on land under the authority of the provincial authorities, not the church, and without state authorization. This "illegal act" violated several Vietnamese laws and regulations, including construction laws, religious laws, and a Ministry of Defense regulation that prohibits construction in "military" zones. Despite repeated requests from local, provincial and central government authorities to remove the crucifix, the local parish refused. Moreover, according to MPS, the local priest in Dong Chiem during mass encouraged his parishioners to resist calls to remove the crucifix. As a result, on January 6, Dong Chiem officials were forced to remove the crucifix in order to enforce Vietnamese law and restore public security and order. In response, the local priest mobilized "hundreds" of priests, nuns, and parishioners to oppose the local authorities. Dong Chiem officials talked most of these individuals to disperse. Contrary to erroneous press reports, local authorities did not use violence

HANOI 00000001 002 OF 002

to disperse the individuals. Two individuals suffered minor injuries, but these were the result of skirmishes between them and innocent bystanders.

16. (C) Colonel Chau lamented that the foreign media and certain individuals in Vietnam were using the local authorities' decision to implement the law as pretext for arguing that Vietnam does not respect religious freedoms. Chau defended Vietnam's record and urged the U.S. to distinguish between issues related to "religious freedoms" and those related to "Vietnamese law." Colonel Chau noted that there were reports that some parishioners were constructing a replacement crucifix made of bamboo. Finally, Chau said the GVN was responsible for implementing Vietnamese law and providing public security. Any individual(s) found to be stirring up unrest would be dealt with under the law.

17. (C) Political Counselor replied that we had reliable information and press reports that suggested that public security forces and other armed individuals had used violence on some of the parishioners, and that several were injured as a result, a charge that Colonel Chau denied. Political Counselor noted recent progress on religious freedom and agreed Vietnam had the right to uphold its laws. However, he cautioned that the mood on Washington regarding Vietnam was souring in some quarters following the recent deterioration in human rights here. Credible reports of security personnel engaging in violence to resolve differences with religious followers - whether they be Catholics in Dong Chiem or Buddhists in Lam Dong - would only sour the mood further and could complicate efforts to move forward in the relationship. Chau took note of the message, but defended Vietnam's record on religious freedom and encouraged the Embassy to make sure that Washington "understands the real Vietnam."

18. (C) Comment: We welcome MPS's pro-activeness in reaching out to us to provide an "official" GVN position on the recent and past events surrounding Dong Chiem. However, we seriously question the accuracy of their information - particularly Colonel Chau's denial

that public security forces used tear gas and other methods to disperse parishioners, or that public security officials were not responsible for at least some of the injuries suffered. MPS's motivation in reaching out is largely driven by a desire to get out in front and "shape" the story, and avoid having to respond to criticism that its security forces were either involved in acts of violence against the parishioners, or sat by while such violence occurred. At this early stage, it is too early to say for sure whether this is a "religious" or "land" issue. We suspect it is a combination of the two. We are conferring with our Catholic church contacts regarding MPS's assertions that the local parish violated Vietnamese law in erecting the crucifix and refused to remove it despite requests from authorities. Either way, the GVN's handling of the situation - particularly its recourse to violence, rather than the chronology of events that led up to the fracas that matters. As in Lam Dong, local authorities "thuggish" responses threaten to overshadow the progress made in other areas of international religious freedom. End comment.

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